

Robyn Cobb/R2/FWS/DOI
01/05/2010 10:22 AM

To Peter Plage/R6/FWS/DOI@FWS
cc Aimee M Roberson/R2/FWS/DOI@FWS, Alisa
Shull/R2/FWS/DOI@FWS
bcc

Subject Fw: Mountain plovers

History:  This message has been forwarded.

----- Forwarded by Robyn Cobb/R2/FWS/DOI on 01/05/2010 11:21 AM -----



"Sekula, Willie D CTR USAF
AFCEE AFCEE/EXA"
<Willie.Sekula.ctr@brooks.af.
mil>
12/22/2009 10:20 AM

To <Robyn_Cobb@fws.gov>, "Mel Cooksey" <ssi@stx.rr.com>
cc "David Newstead" <dnewstead@cbbep.org>,
<geneb@cbbep.org>, "Derek Muschalek"
<naturalist@ranchwireless.com>
Subject RE: Mountain plovers

Hi Robyn,

I would echo Mel's comments. When it comes to finding Mountain Plovers in South Texas it's hit (occasionally) or miss (most of the time). Besides the wandering nature of the species, access to habitat is very limited. Yes, you can find the plovers in agriculture fields by driving county roads but a considerable amount of habitat is not accessible. You could literally spend weeks or months driving the thousands of miles in rural county roads. Most of us don't have the time to do that kind of surveying.

A prime example of inaccessible birds is the flock that winters on fields on the Half Brothers Ranch near Pearsall (Frio County). Martin Reid found around 225 birds on this ranch several years ago. The birds apparently utilize the irrigated fields every winter. These fields are not visible from any public road. There are probably a number of these irrigated fields on private ranches in South Texas that are not accessible to birders. Bill Holliday (from New Braunfels) spent considerable time looking for Mountain Plovers in South Texas several years ago. I think he tallied somewhere around 1200 birds in about a half a dozen counties. The bottom line is that we really don't know for sure how many Mountain Plovers spend the winter in South Texas but I would think that Mel's estimate is probably about as good as you can do with these limitations.

Regards,
Willie

From: Robyn_Cobb@fws.gov [mailto:Robyn_Cobb@fws.gov]
Sent: Friday, December 18, 2009 2:39 PM
To: Mel Cooksey
Cc: David Newstead; geneb@cbbep.org; naturalist@dewittec.net; Sekula, Willie D CTR USAF AFCEE AFCEE/EXA
Subject: Re: Mountain plovers

Thanks so much Mel - that is great info.

I'm really surprised about the 2,000 - 3,000 count - I had no idea there was anything like that number coming here to winter (although the only info I have at all regarding abundance in this area comes from a compilation done by someone who used CBC's and TexBird records). Are you basing your guesstimates on the size and number of different flocks that you see within a given day(s)? I've never really tried to locate MoPl's, and given your description of the effort required, my hat is surely off to you.

Thanks again for sharing your knowledge,
Have a very Merry Christmas and happy holiday season,
Robyn

Mountain Plovers are regular low-density winter residents. They can be found in the most extensive areas of ag fields. They will prefer recently plowed fields, but can occur any any type of plowed fields. I do not find them in grasslands or fallow fields, with one or two exceptions in twenty plus years of observations. One of the best ways to locate them is to find a tractor working a field and check out the birdlife. Usually the crowd can include Killdeer, Black-bellied Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls, and maybe American Pipit. Occasionally, MOPLs will be present.

MOPLs are NOT easy to find. Visiting birders are always asking for a sure spot. Probably, the worst place to look for MOPLs is wherever they were yesterday. It requires lots of slow driving around the fields, checking and maybe scoping the fields, watching for a flock in flight, or working all the fields with tractors. I would guesstimate the total population in Nueces and San Patricio Counties to be around 2000-3000 birds at any one time; a pretty important percentage of the world population. Problem is, considering the vast areas of habitat, even with that number, it is sort of the needle in the haystack approach. I have "blanked" more days than scored on MOPLs.

I like the Chapman Ranch fields, areas along CR 55 and CR 51 over to the new landfill, all the way down to Hwy. 70. Also areas just west of Robstown have been good. Fields east of Odem are sometimes good. They can be found with enough searching. I have found no fluctuation in populations, but that is quite subjective. We just don't see enough of the birds, nor are we able to census them effectively due to their habits, their wandering flock behavior, etc. I doubt that there are "good years" and "bad years" for our birds, but I am not qualified to comment on hazards such as pesticides, etc.

Mel Cooksey

From

Sent: Friday, December 18, 2009 1:26 PM

Subject: RE: Mountain plovers

Hi Robyn:

I have practically no sighting info on mountain plovers in the area, though I do know that they occur here. Most of the reports I've heard of are in ag fields, often following active plows. They may well use other habitats such as overgrazed pasture but since the area is quite rich (in terms of acres) in both tilled ag and overgrazed pasture and these are habitats that are probably less frequently birded than more wooded areas and beaches, I'd think that combination of less effort divided by much more area would necessarily result in fewer sightings. Basically there could be a lot of needles but it's a really big haystack.

I'm copying Mel Cooksey, Willie Sekula, and Derek Muschalek, who are all extensively familiar with the bird life of south TX and the Coastal Bend. Perhaps they have some more insight into mountain plover wintering distribution. I would think that potential threats in this area would be those associated with any bird that spends a lot of time in ag fields - pesticides, and now (my favorite) wind farms.

Mel, Willie, Derek - As you may know, the decision to NOT list the mountain plover as a federally Endangered Species several years ago was appealed and sent back for a more focused review, and Robyn with USFWS is in charge of helping review the birds' usage of this region.

Thanks,

David

From: Robyn_Cobb@fws.gov [mailto:Robyn_Cobb@fws.gov]

Sent: Friday, December 18, 2009 11:05 AM

To: geneb@cbbep.org; dnewstead@cbbep.org

Subject: RE: Mountain plovers

Hi Gene & David,

I'm trying to find out whatever I can regarding mountain plover occurrences in the Coastal Bend or other parts of S. Texas. Looking for info on distribution, abundance, years of occurrence, habitat type, and threats. Wanted to run this past you and see if you had any personal observations and also to ask you if there were other folks that you would recommend that I contact.

David - Although I've already had Loren contact you about Christmas Bird Counts, I didn't remember to have her ask you about any people you might recommend as a good source of sightings data.

Thanks in advance for any help,
And Merry Christmas!!

Robyn